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AUTHOR Swift, Doug
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ABSTRACT

New Mexico's 19 "very small" school districts (fewer than 300 average daily membership K-12 in 1981-82) were studied to identify major problems (including program deficiencies and actions being taken to alleviate those problems), to determine appropriate additional measures which might be helpful in resolving the problems, and to ascertain whether adjustments in the funding formula would substantially alleviate any of the problems. Although very small districts are largely ignored in the literature, the 19 very small districts represent 21% of New Mexico's school districts. Data were obtained from a questionnaire sent to the superintendents, from a meeting of representatives from 10 of the smallest districts, and from information from the public school finance division and the state department of education. The four primary concerns of the school districts were: certification, multiple endorsement, and staff development; adequate instructional programs and student services; salary comparability; and housing and community resources. There are some things that can be done (some examples are given) within individual districts, among districts, and in conjunction with nearby postsecondary schools to alleviate many of the problems. The encouragement and leadership of state regulatory and funding agencies, the Legislature, and state professional organizations are also needed. (BRR)

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Declining Enrollment and the "Very Small" School District

Doug Swift
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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Declining Enrollment and the "Very Small" School District

The Problems

The "very small" in the title of this paper refers to districts with average daily membership (ADM) of fewer than 300 students. There were 19 such districts in New Mexico in 1981-82 with memberships ranging from 60 students to 262 students. During that year, all 19 districts offered educational programs from kindergarden through grade 12.

Very small districts are largely ignored in the literature. Although there is a body of literature dealing with "small" schools and school districts, the literature generally considers small to be larger than 300 pupil enrollment. In the fall of 1977, there were 4,300 districts in the country with enrollments of fewer than 300 students. These school districts represented 26.7% of the districts in the United States, but the total enrollment in these districts accounted for only 1.2% of the total public school enrollment, grades 1-12.

Similarly in New Mexico, the 19 very small districts represent 21% of the 89 school districts in the state, and their total enrollment represents 1.2% of the New Mexico public school enrollment, grades K-12.

Small schools and small school districts are recognized in the state funding formula. The budgeted expenditures in the 19 districts for 1980-81 represent $4,975 per student compared with a statewide average of $2,491 per student. The ability of the very small districts to spend twice the statewide per-pupil expenditures reflects the revenues generated by the school and district size adjustment factors.

There have been increasing requests from the very small districts, however, for adjustments in the funding formula which would cause additional funds to flow to the very small districts. The program offerings and the funding needs of the very small districts have been a legislative concern from time to time, most recently in the 1982 session. These requests and concerns lead to three studies--one by King (1982), one by Davis (1982), and the one reported in this paper.

The study reported here involved the 19 very small school districts. The purpose of the study was to identify the major problems, including program deficiencies, of the very small districts and actions being taken to alleviate these problems, to determine appropriate additional measures which might be helpful in resolving the problems, and to ascertain whether or not adjustments in the funding formula would substantially alleviate any of the problems.

Data were obtained directly and indirectly from the districts themselves. Data included responses to a questionnaire sent to the superintendents, the results of a meeting of representatives of 10 of the smallest districts, budget materials submitted to the Public School Finance Division, and information submitted to the State Department of Education.

There are many fine programs and attributes--curricular and extra-curricular, intentional and unintentional--in very small school districts. We all know--or at least assume--there is more to be learned from school experiences than classroom learning. We also know--or assume--that students learn more in classes with low pupil-teacher ratios--a condition which exists in all of the very small school districts.

But the benefits of smallness are not without cost--costs as measured in dollars and in a variety of problems that were identified in the study. As mentioned above, in terms of dollars, New Mexico spends twice as much per student in the very small districts than in the "average" district. Costs not measured in terms of dollars include deficiencies in programs and services for students, problems with certification and staff development, inadequate housing for staff, and inadequate community resources, activities, and other employment opportunities--all despite high per-pupil expenditures. It is not clear that money alone will alleviate many of these problems, but it is apparent that declining enrollments exacerbate the problems of the very small school districts. Somewhat larger districts, those that might be considered to be small rather than very small, will undoubtedly face the problems enumerated in this study if their enrollments decline and the districts become "very small".

Certification and Staff Development

The most pervasive problem relates to teacher certification and staff development. Sixteen of the 19 superintendents listed certification and multiple endorsements among their top five concerns. Thirteen of the superintendents identified certification as a statutory or regulatory constraint which prevents an adequate student program. It appears that the problems may not be limited to the very small districts; the state and teacher training institutions may hinder more than help as indicated by the following:

> Certification and endorsement requirements may be internally inconsistent.
>
> Certification and multiple endorsement requirements may be unrealistic for teachers in many districts and and subject areas, not just for those in small school districts.

New Mexico is one of the few states without certification reciprocity.

Recertification requirements may be often unrelated to teachers' professional development needs.

Board of Educational Finance funding criteria discourage teacher training institutions from carrying staff development programs (both formal courses as well as workshops) to the districts, and it is difficult for teachers from remote areas to go where the training is currently offered.

Teacher training institutions may not encourage appropriate multiple certification/endorsements suitable to the needs of small districts.

Quality Educational Programs

Almost all superintendents in the 19 districts are concerned with "unmet program needs." "College prep"--specifically science, foreign language, and computer education--and vocational education were the most-mentioned curricular needs. Enrichment opportunities (music, art, drama) were mentioned next most frequently. Supportive services (counseling, libraries) came in third and facilities were fourth.

All but one of the 19 districts are approved by the State Board of Education or are in the approval process; one district is "approved--warned." In the eyes of the State Department of Education, however, none of the districts offer a complete high school program with fully-certified and properly-endorsed staff as defined in the New Mexico Educational Standards.

The State Department of Education provided secondary school program information on 18 of the 19 districts. Except where noted otherwise, information is for the 1981-82 school year.

Science. One district offers no lab science. Eight districts, however, offer two lab sciences, and two districts offer one lab science in addition to chemistry and/or biology.

Mathematics. Among the categories of algebra, geometry, and advanced math, one district offers none of these courses; eight districts offer only algebra or geometry; eight districts offer advanced math, but five of these do not offer either algebra or geometry.

Foreign Language. Six districts do not offer a foreign language.

Art and Fine Art. Five districts have no offerings in this area; 10 have one offering; three have two offerings.

Vocational Education. According to 1980-81 information from the vocational education unit, one of the 18 school districts provides no skill training vocational program; 11 districts offer one program, and six districts offer two programs. In addition, all of the districts offer at least one exploratory vocational program, 16 of the districts offer two or more exploratory programs. Most of the districts offer industrial arts.

Physical Education. The requirement for physical education is met in every district--some many times over.

The above program information from the State Department of Education may be a "snapshot" and may not reveal courses taught back-to-back.

The State Department of Education also provided information relating to instructional support and student services. The following data are noteworthy:

Libraries. All but four of the districts indicate they provide library services with most of these served by part-time librarians. It may be that services are provided in the four districts, but librarians, as such, are not employed.

Counseling. Ten of the 18 districts do not provide counseling services--at least no person is employed specifically to provide these services. Services may be provided by teaching counselors or by administrators, but such information does not appear on the State Department of Education information.

Salary Comparability

A majority of the superintendents identified noncompetitive salary schedules as one of the top five concerns which prevent a comprehensive program. Analysis of the salary schedules in the 19 districts, however, indicates that beginning salaries are comparable with those of four larger districts used for comparison--but only beginning salaries. As teachers gain experience and advanced degrees, salaries in the 19 districts fall behind the comparison districts with substantial disparities at and beyond the MA+15 with 12 years of experience level. It is possible, however, as at least one district demonstrates, to maintain comparable salaries across the full range of training and experience--but only at the expense of reduced staff and increased pupil-teacher ratio.

Despite low PTR in all districts, ranging from 8.3 to 14.6, and with 16 of the 19 districts anticipating a decreased enrollment in 1982-83 as compared with 1981-82, 10 of the districts expected to maintain the 1981-82 teaching staff and six expected to increase somewhat the number of teachers. It appears that maintaining or increasing teaching staff and thereby at least maintaining the student programs and services status quo is of higher priority than is salary comparability.

Staff Housing

Housing for staff was identified by 15 of the 19 superintendents as among the top five concerns, and nine superintendents listed lack of community activities, resources, and other employment opportunities among the top concerns. Both, of course, impact ability to recruit instructors

and both lead to high turnover among new instructors. Some of the New Mexico very small districts are located near larger population centers which can provide cultural and entertainment opportunities, shopping centers, and employment opportunities for spouses. Other districts are relatively remote and must use recruitment strategies which appeal to prospective employees who may desire a more rural, community-centered lifestyle.

Summary

Recapitulating, the four primary concerns of the very small school districts are (1) certification, multiple endorsement, and staff development; (2) adequate instructional program and student services; (3) salary comparability; and (4) housing and community resources. The next section describes some of the steps which are being taken in each of these areas and contains some recommendations for further action.

Action and Recommendations

Staff Housing and Community Resources

In regard to housing, most of the available capital outlay resources are restricted from uses other than for instructional facilities. Revenue bonds might be used for construction of housing but there is a feeling that with high construction costs and interest rates, the required rent to service the bonds would be prohibitively high.

General obligation bonds must be used for instructional facilities. To comply with this requirement, one district has designed three houses for instructional use; each house uses solar energy in a different manner and the houses will be used as instructional laboratories in the use of solar energy as well as for staff housing.

A number of districts are studying the possibility of contracting with nearby postsecondary vocational education schools to build small houses. The houses may be constructed on site or at the postsecondary school and then transported to the school district. The cost of such construction would be much lower than housing built by a general contractor and thus could be financed by revenue bonds or lease-purchase agreements.

A third possibility is housing constructed by high school construction trades programs. Local construction by the school offers distinct possibilities in use of community resources: donated or at-cost construction materials and volunteer construction expertise.

Finally, awareness of the housing problem within the community may open housing opportunities not previously recognized.

Community awareness and involvement is important in recruitment. The superintendent of one relatively isolated community insists on personal visits, including the family if the candidate is married. The community is involved in the recruitment effort and the distinct advantages--hiking, camping, historical interests, and the frequent community activities often centered on the school--are extolled.

We frequently look to the state for solutions to local problems. While the availability of construction funds or low-interest loans might provide a solution, it may be possible to alleviate the situations totally within each community through implementation of one or more of the above strategies.

Salary Comparability

There is as yet no specific recommendation in regard to salary comparability. Priorities of the very small districts vary from district to district, and the general infusion of money into the very small districts may not result in salary comparability. In general, very small districts offer salaries at the beginning level comparable to beginning salaries in larger districts. Very small districts that want comparability across the salary schedule have attained it. There is no consensus that additional money would be used to attain salary comparability in the remaining very small districts.

King (1982) asked the superintendents in his study what primary need would be addressed if additional revenue were made available. The responses generally were concerned with maintaining a "good, sound, well-rounded" educational program. Other responses included upgrading instructional

materials, adding support personnel and upgrading facilities. Although salary improvement was included in the list, there was a large number of other priorities expressed. As a consequence, no recommendation is yet formulated for attaining salary comparability--if indeed this is a priority--in the very small districts.

Quality Educational Programs

Very small districts have taken a variety of actions to attain and maintain program quality. Some are accomplished entirely within districts, some are shared between districts, and some are in conjunction with post-secondary schools. A variety of methods are in use to meet program needs of students:

Artist in the Schools;
contracted librarian for consultant services to school library;
two-year alternating class schedule;
minicourses;
Upward Bound and swimming program with local university;
Centro Campesino health services;
directed study in specialized areas;
correspondence courses for credit;
student aides and student tutors;
cross-over college credit with local university;
credit for private music instruction;
teachers-as-counselors;
individualized instruction;

extensive use of field trips;

combined classes; and

combined grade levels.

Many superintendents mentioned administrative actions which they considered helpful in meeting program needs of the students. These include:

giving careful attention to scheduling;

recruiting teachers with needed certifications and endorsements;

involving teachers in planning;

completing progress reports every four weeks on students not performing to expectations;

adopting a four-day school week;

improving salaries in order to attract top teachers;

encouraging teachers to gain additional endorsements; and

scheduling all high school teachers for seven teaching periods per day.

A number of cooperative instructional programs and services are provided among districts. A majority of superintendents reported that special education diagnostic and/or ancillary services are provided on a cooperative or shared basis. In addition, the following were mentioned:

drivers' education;

evening school;

Title I/Migrant;

music;

health services;

Artist in the Schools;

vocational programs with Area Vocational Schools; and

cooperative bidding and ordering.

Cooperative programs such as these need to be encouraged in all small districts as appropriate and applicable. Other arrangements, particularly joint programs with postsecondary schools and further use of high technology, need to be investigated. The efforts of Eastern New Mexico University and University of New Mexico in the use of telecommunications for instruction, staff development, and even administrative purposes should continue to be encouraged.

Ten of the 19 smallest districts are located within 32 miles of a postsecondary school--university, community college, or Area Vocational School. Yet only three districts mentioned cooperative programs or arrangements with such schools. Their successful use in other parts of the state should encourage implementation in other small districts where distances are tolerable.

Among school districts, however, there are both philosophical and pragmatic barriers to shared programs and services.

> Although a person conducting a shared program may be employed full-time, each district perceives the person as a part-timer who therefore is not accepted fully by the staff and community--perhaps not even in the person's "home" community.
>
> Questions arise as to which district is responsible for hiring, evaluation, salary determination, fringe benefits, tenure, and similar details.
>
> Some small districts are reluctant to share with a larger district for fear (perhaps justified) that the larger district will run the program as it believes it should be run rather than meeting the needs of the small district.
>
> Some shared programs incur additional expenses, often in the form of transportation and instructional equipment, which cannot be borne by the districts involved.

> Finally, shared programs are sometimes considered a step toward consolidation. A shared program may be an indication that a district can't do it all by itself.

The mechanisms for shared programs exist through contracts and joint powers agreements. Many of the fears and problems can be alleviated through frank discussions among districts and aggressive assistance by the State Department of Education. Some of the barriers might be alleviated by State Department of Education involvement in the program, perhaps through a service center approach. The mechanisms exist in law.

Innovative and nontraditional approaches to improve quality of education frequently incur additional costs. It is recommended that a mechanism for reimbursement of additional cost be devised. Approval by the State Department of Education and disbursement of specifically-appropriated funds by Public School Finance Division is a suggested possibility.

Certification and Staff Development

Alleviation of certification and staff development concerns requires action on a variety of fronts. Work is needed with and by the State Board of Education and the Professional Standards Commission:

> to insure that certification and endorsement requirements are consistent and appropriate;
>
> to investigate the feasibility of certification reciprocity with other states;
>
> to investigate the feasibility of less-restrictive requirements for endorsements in cluster areas (as proposed by Davis, 1982,;
>
> to investigate the feasibility of alternative endorsement procedures--examination, on-site assessment, local recommendations, and interviews (as proposed by Davis, 1982);
>
> to investigate the feasibility of noncategorical endorsement of special education teachers (as proposed by Wirth and Cole, 1982); and

to investigate the feasibility of recertification based on programs devised to meet the specific professional development needs of teachers.

Work is needed with and by teacher training institutions in developing multiple endorsement programs and in encouraging students to pursue programs which will enhance their employability in school districts both large and small. Teacher training institutions must be encouraged to work with districts in developing staff development programs designed to meet specific needs of instructors and other staff members.

Work is needed with and by the Board of Educational Finance to develop funding mechanisms which encourage teacher training institutions to provide staff development training where teachers are located.

Given that teachers in small districts must double in brass and given no retreat from the current, highly-restricted certification requirements, salary increments for multiple endorsements and for multiple teaching assignments may be appropriate incentives for teachers to obtain multiple endorsements and to remain in small districts. If districts were to adopt such a scheme, the incurred costs could be recognized appropriately in the Training and Experience factor in the funding formula. Considerable study is needed, however, before this recommendation is adopted.

Consolidation

One recommendation not proposed by the school districts but which must be addressed in the case of very small districts is consolidation. Consolidation should be considered as a means of attaining improved educational programs and student services, particularly as enrollment declines, and should be considered well before a district has no other alternatives.

Legislation is needed to make consolidation easier (so that it is considered something more than a last resort) and to provide incentives for consolidation.

Some schools and school districts are so remote that consolidation cannot be an alternative under any condition. Such schools should be considered "necessary and remote." Additional funds may be needed to help small districts maintain quality education as best can be provided, but only when the schools meet criteria for "necessary and remote" rather than a criterion of "small."

Conclusion

The problems of the very small districts are numerous, but they are not insurmountable. As have been described, there are some things that can be done within individual districts, among districts, and in conjunction with nearby postsecondary schools to alleviate many of the problems. In some cases, carefully placed funds to offset additional incurred costs may be used to maintain or improve educational quality. The encouragement and leadership of the State Board and State Department of Education, Board of Educational Finance, Public School Finance Division, and the Legislature are needed. The assistance of state organizations such as the New Mexico School Boards Association, New Mexico School Administrators, and teacher organizations will be helpful. Through concerted effort, the problems of the very small districts can be substantially alleviated.

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